

# Post-Pandemic Educational Reforms in ASEAN

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## Executive Summary:

The COVID-19 pandemic led to massive learning disruptions for millions of children and youth, while increasing learning poverty and dropout rates. Learning loss has emerged as a challenge for ASEAN, despite efforts by Education Ministries over the last three years to launch flexible learning options and remediation interventions to close learning gaps. ASEAN Member States (AMS) have devised contextualised solutions, experimented with innovation, and supported digital transformation based on available resources. Such initiatives were facilitated by public/private partnerships (PPPs) and stimulated continued educational reforms in the post-pandemic era.

## Recommendations:

To accelerate post-pandemic learning, AMS should:

- Revise or develop education policies to improve access to

quality education and increase focus on foundational learning to enhance the fundamental skills of learners.

- Address the needs of the most disadvantaged learners, using appropriate assessment tools and strategies to ensure that all learners can access quality teaching in technology-mediated classrooms.
- Increase the use of technology in teaching and improve educational infrastructure to meet the needs of learners, including marginalised or lower socio-economic status learners.
- Sustain investment in teacher training, capacity building for regional teachers, and sharing best practices for catch-up teaching strategies in ASEAN.
- Ensure the sustainability of pandemic educational interventions, including focusing on the socio-emotional health and well-being of learners and teachers and developing stronger and relevant PPPs.

## 1 Introduction

The pandemic disrupted the education of more than 152 million children and youth in Southeast Asia over the last three years (UNESCO, 2020). Learning poverty was impacted by school closures and lockdowns, and accentuated by the absence of remote learning pathways and a lack of access to digital infrastructure and devices. Learners from vulnerable backgrounds dropped out. Some never had the opportunity to return to school. After the pandemic, ensuring access to quality education has remained a challenge for many AMS.

While educational transformation has always required aggressive reform of Education Ministries, the pandemic identified critical issues and gaps that have made collaboration and fostering PPPs more urgent. Unless effective action on education is taken, AMS will face heightened disparities, reduced human capital, and increased learning poverty.

This Policy Brief examines innovative educational programs and transformative policies in AMS, and how these initiatives addressed the education crisis and supported marginalised learners during and after the pandemic. It also provides recommendations for educational reform to ensure no one will be left behind in pursuing digital transformation in education.

## Scope and Methodology

This Policy Brief is based on research into the education crisis following the pandemic and post-pandemic reflections on lessons learned and best practices. Through focus group discussions and key informant interviews, it identifies educational programs and initiatives that could potentially future-proof AMS national education systems.

## 2 Post-Pandemic Education Reforms

One lesson learned was the importance of learning continuity and the delivery of educational services in any situation. Virtually overnight, teachers during the pandemic learned how to develop modules, teach with technology, and utilise relevant and contextualised resources. AMS must respond to how the pandemic accelerated the rate of digital transformation in education, which must be future-proofed by creating more opportunities and programs for disadvantaged learners who might fall further behind.

## 3 Key Findings

### A. Effect of COVID-19 on Learning Poverty

Before the pandemic, AMS education systems had been already facing challenges. Subsequently, disruptions in school systems led to increased learning poverty, which is defined as a student's inability to read and understand a simple text by age 10. The learning poverty rates of six AMS ranged between 1.7% and 51.1%, according to a report from the World Bank and UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS). Learning poverty rates were also high for boys and children from low-income families, while rural areas had higher rates of learning poverty than urban areas (UNESCO, 2021). These disparities reflect deep-rooted education inequities in the region that were made worse by the pandemic-related school closures. The digital divide became more pronounced, especially for remote and online learners, who also faced a lack of parental support for distance learning.

The global learning poverty rate in low- and middle-income countries rose from 57% in 2019 to an estimated 70% in 2022, according to simulations by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2022). Current students may lose US\$17 trillion in lifetime earnings as a result of pandemic-related school closures (UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank, 2021).

Table 1. State of Global Learning Poverty, 2022

	Country	Learning Poverty	Learning Deprivation	Schooling Deprivation
Asia	China	18	18	0
	India	56	54	5
	Japan	4	2	2
	Korea, Rep	3	1	3
Southeast Asia	Indonesia	53	49	7
	Malaysia	42	42	1
	Philippines	91	90	5
	Singapore	3	3	0
	Thailand	23	22	2
	Viet Nam	18	18	0

Source: World Bank, 2022

### B. Effect of COVID-19 on Dropout Rates

School closures and the instantaneous switch to remote learning amplified existing educational challenges in AMS. Little to no access to the internet and necessary devices led many schoolchildren to miss foundational learning or drop out. Experience from previous crises suggests that not all students will return to school. Many will be forced to work due to financial constraints, while female learners will enter early or forced marriages. Up to 10 million girls could become child brides over the next decade due to the pandemic, according to a UNICEF report (2021).

### C. Effect of COVID-19 on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in ASEAN Education

While AMS implemented multi-modal teaching and learning at the pandemic's height, students and teachers had limited access to needed digital infrastructure and devices. There was also a lack of materials accessible to disadvantaged students. Students in rural areas lacked the internet access that was available in urban areas, making online learning exceptionally challenging (ASEAN, 2020). The digital divide and other pandemic challenges increased the risk of not returning to school for an estimated 4.5 million students in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, including two million women and girls (44%) (UNESCO, 2020).

### D. Educational Responses to the Pandemic: Programs and Policies Worth Emulating

Despite effective pandemic responses, there were also setbacks in bridging the gaps in educational access, equity, and quality. AMS must act immediately and decisively before pandemic-related educational disparities widen and become long-term problems.

### E. Equitable Education Fund (EEF) Thailand Innovates Multi-Sector Partnerships to Fund Educational Programs

EEF is an autonomous entity funded by 1% to 2% of Thailand's education budget and donations from private organisations and citizens. EEF works with international organisations such as ASEAN, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) UNESCO, and UNICEF for program implementation and knowledge sharing. The collaborative funding approach aims to achieve inclusive and equitable quality education through financial assistance programs that encourage children to stay or return to school, provide alternative and community-based education access to out-of-school youth, and improve teacher and school quality. Established by Thailand's Equitable Education Act 2018, EEF demonstrates how PPPs can succeed by:

1. Promoting Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)-related projects to potential donors and partners by tailoring presentations to their needs,

2. measuring results using a transparent impact measurement mechanism,
3. offering tax incentives to donors and partners,
4. encouraging innovative financing mechanisms, and
5. convincing the private sector that their participation is an investment in human capital.

## F. Cambodia's Secondary Education Improvement Project (SEIP)

Cambodia's Education Ministry (MoEYS) and the World Bank spearheaded SEIP to expand lower secondary education to conform to minimum standards for school effectiveness in target areas. Cambodia implemented school-based management reforms that engaged parents and communities in student education. Through SEIP, MoEYS rehabilitated 100 schools to make them more conducive to learning and teaching. The project also established 30 new lower secondary schools, while community representatives, educators, and school heads received training and mentorship opportunities.

## G. Indonesia's Kartu Prakerja Program

Indonesia's Kartu Prakerja program is a government-led initiative that encourages lifelong learning, develops participant competencies, encourages entrepreneurship through skill improvement initiatives, and increases productivity and competitiveness. Launched in April 2020, the program has since provided beneficiaries with training vouchers they were free to use on training that matched their interests. Participants during the pandemic also received cash incentives after completing training. From 2020 to 2023, more than 17.6 million people across the region and from varying socio-economic backgrounds participated in the program, 51% of whom were women and 3% who were disabled. Kartu Prakerja partnered with digital platform providers and training institutions, highlighting the effectiveness of well-designed PPPs.

## H. Last Mile Learners in the Philippines

The Philippine Education Ministry developed the Last Mile Schools (LSM) program to address gaps in resources and facilities of schools that were geographically isolated or in disadvantaged areas. The LSM program transformed makeshift classrooms into standard classrooms, installed solar panels when electricity was not available, and deployed teachers to ensure quality education was provided to learners.

# 4 Policy Recommendations

A renewed focus on building resilience and innovation in education systems is necessary for all AMS following the pandemic. The policy recommendations are:

## 1. Revitalise inclusive education policies and develop new ones

Revitalise inclusive education policies and develop new policies that reflect digitalisation, gender equity, and Industry 5.0 by:

- a) Expanding the definition of lifelong learning and literacy. Post-pandemic educational transformation requires that policymakers redefine literacy to encompass a broad spectrum of essential skills, including climate, digital, financial, and functional literacy skills. Integrating a multidisciplinary approach into curricula would make literacy more accessible to marginalized groups, especially women and girls, allowing them to better face post-pandemic challenges.
- b) Expanding stakeholders to improve educational access and lifelong learning. To maintain the same quality and inclusiveness across schools, governments should expand PPPs that facilitate inclusivity and equitability in education, foster synergies, and promote resource sharing, to ensure that more learners receive a quality education.
- c) Investing in teachers and technological infrastructure. AMS should make

and fulfil commitments to address pandemic-related learning losses; fulfil National Commitments made during the Transformative Education Summit in 2022; and implement reforms that include investing in teachers, teacher training, and catch-up strategies for learners.

## 2. Address the learning needs of the most disadvantaged learners, especially those in their foundational years

AMS must strengthen programs focused on early childhood care and education (ECCE), increase public funding for programs, and enhance support for teachers and education and personnel.

- a) Make ECCE inclusive. Inclusivity begins with early learning at home, making the role of women and primary caregivers critical. AMS can partner with local and grassroots organizations to empower women. As children's primary caregivers and guardians, women should be aided in developing essential life skills, most importantly financial literacy.
- b) Direct more resources to early childhood education (ECE) programs. Making ECE more affordable and equitable can include allocating government funds to give children a strong foundation for their primary education and beyond, thus alleviating learning poverty and providing children with better paths in life. Funding can take the form of capital and resource subsidies, which would require governments to invest in building schools and training staff (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021; Bertram and Pascal, 2016).
- c) Muster support from the private sector and civil society organisations. Governments can reduce the financial costs of providing technology-mediated education through partnerships and tap human resources from industry-based groups, such as AMS chambers of commerce, telecom companies, and private and religious groups. These organizations can help train school staff, aid in building facilities, and provide financial assistance to educational institutions, especially those in disadvantaged locations.

## 3. Create Effective and Sustainable PPPs

- a) Governments can craft national policies to facilitate the creation of autonomous funds similar to Thailand's EEF. Such independent bodies could promote inclusive and equitable education by devising innovative financing mechanisms. Funding could be secured from the private sector through various means that engage multiple sectors, such as corporate sponsorships, charitable lotteries, social impact bonds, and crowdfunding. For instance, EEF has various scholarship programs, such as those targeted at the poorest children and students in remote areas (Home Grown Teacher Scholarship Program, n.d.). These programs are open to private-sector co-funding and would help businesses with corporate social responsibility initiatives through programs that target the most vulnerable learners, including women and girls, physically and mentally challenged children, and those residing in remote areas (Riekk, I. [2023] Personal Interview).
- b) Focus on outcomes when seeking PPPs. Fund administrators must be able to speak the corporate world's language by showing corporate leaders the measurable impact of their investments in education and lifelong learning. They can develop impact measurement mechanisms that track both financial and non-financial metrics to assess PPP outcomes and guide both parties in making future decisions.
- c) Support education-related efforts of self-help groups. AMS can develop sustainable strategies to support self-help groups in getting more involved in advocacy within their respective communities. By doing so, everyone can be given access to education, regardless of ethnicity or social status. Projects including conditional cash transfers, community-based education, vocational scholarships, or teacher training programs can be tailored to match the prospective partners' scale and interests. Customising funding presentations and making presentations relatable to the target strategy would enable governments to secure

continuous private-sector investment in education by ensuring a deeper understanding of a program's goals and relevance at the national and corporate levels. This would entail presenting education as a major contributor to the development of human capital.

## 5 Conclusion

Educational transformation focusing on inclusivity, equitability, and quality was a priority for ASEAN and AMS even before the pandemic. However, the global health crisis demonstrated the education sector's unreadiness to respond to large-scale disruptions, making the need for educational reforms more urgent than ever.

Effective initiatives, such as Cambodia's SEIP, Indonesia's Kartu Prakerja, the Philippines' Last Mile Schools, and Thailand's EEF are excellent models for AMS to emulate and tailor to their specific education and economic contexts. These programs and projects were based on an assumption that educational

transformation remained a shared responsibility that required the cooperation of all stakeholders. Governments, education ministries, local organizations, private entities, and the international community must work together to make education accessible and equitable at all times.

As the primary duty bearers, AMS governments must take charge by crafting national inclusive education policies and frameworks that include specific strategies to reach marginalized learners, implement comprehensive approaches to literacy acquisition, promote lifelong learning, and ensure the education sector's resilience against future crises and learning disruption.

Further, private companies, civil society organizations, private citizens, and stakeholders should rally behind governments to support inclusive educational initiatives to protect every child's rights to build and improve their nations' human capital.

By incorporating the recommendations in this Policy Brief, AMS have an opportunity to transform their educational landscape. Stakeholders can strive collaboratively for a future where education is accessible to everyone, regardless of ability, gender, location, or social status.

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